



Tomorrow's world

With a new version of Windows, Pentium-based Apple Macs and faster wireless technology all scheduled to appear in 2006, Paul Nesbitt looks forward to an exciting year in IT

It would appear that 2006 is shaping up to be the most interesting year in technology since the end of the internet bubble in 2000. Microsoft might even get around to releasing a new version of Windows. So what will the view be like when Vista finally rolls over the horizon?

The Windows giant has recently reorganised to fend off increasingly aggressive threats posed by Google, Skype, the open-source movement and Apple.

Apple, the Mac maker, is back from the dead and, according to the latest market research, is clawing back market share – especially in the US, where the company has around 4.6 per cent of the PC market, up from just over two per cent a couple of years ago. That may not sound like much, but the company's move to an Intel-based platform in June is expected to produce a spike in sales. By the end of 2006, Microsoft will face a competitor that's in better shape than any it has been up against since Windows 95.

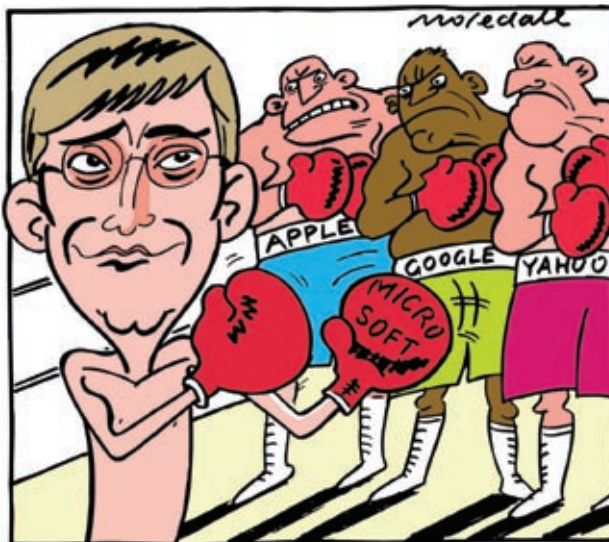
COOKING APPLE

Mac OS X is arguably ahead of Windows Vista in terms of usability, security and functionality. Apple will have an interesting sales proposition, because its Intel-based Macs will also be able to run Windows as well as Linux. If running a multi-boot PC is not your cup of tea, consider this: by the end of the year, Intel will be selling dual-core chips en masse, making it relatively easy to produce a computer that can flip between operating systems in a second. Perhaps the next version of Mac OS X, which is due to appear at the same time as Vista, will make that possible.

Apple will also be trying to make 2006 the year we all start buying and downloading video content from its iTunes Music Store, just as we do with music. Judging by the meagre initial offerings, a few music videos and US-only TV programmes, though, we'd better predict 2007 as the age of downloadable video.

VOCAL SERVICES

The coming year promises more free stuff. First, there's free telephony: whether through internet phone companies such as Vonage or PC-based VoIP services such as Skype, more people will be making calls for free. Right now Skype charges for calls to people who don't use the service, but as more people join, the more free calls there will be. Given that Skype's revenue model is based around charging people to call outsiders, it will be interesting to see how the company finds alternative revenues. Its takeover by eBay suggests that the telephone could ultimately become a free tool for facilitating transactions.



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This year we'll see whether Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft's MSN are really serious about VoIP or are merely considering it as another tick-box item as part of their portal strategies, like instant messaging. And IM should get a lot better this year, thanks to Microsoft and Yahoo!'s deal to make their respective networks interconnect. AOL may dominate IM in the US, but in the UK people are more likely to be using MSN or Yahoo!.

It's hard to see Google Talk having the same impact on IM as Gmail has had on email, though, as there doesn't seem to be a compelling reason to use it so far. Google may say it wants to make all IM interoperable, but if the three biggest IM players won't work with it, Google's position is rather academic. Unless, of course, those rumours that Google is about to buy AOL are true.

SEARCH AND DESTROY

Google's other ventures will almost certainly loom larger this year. The company's deal with Sun to promote OpenOffice.org will finally help the free alternative to Microsoft Office gain more of a foothold. Google's success with the Google Toolbar shows that it knows better than Sun how to get on the PC desktop. Adding OpenOffice.org to its growing suite of services means that many people may never need to leave the Google environment.

The fact that Google will work more closely with Sun on Java means that Microsoft's nightmare scenario of a viable Windows-independent software suite could finally become reality. Microsoft beat

off Netscape's efforts to do the same thing in the 1990s, but this time it could be harder. No-one is predicting the demise of Microsoft Office and Windows' dominance, but it could certainly be weakened, especially when users start totting up the cost of upgrading to Vista and new versions of Office.

Talking of more free stuff, Google recently rolled out free and secure WiFi access in San Francisco, in what many industry watchers believe is the pilot for a US-wide service. If that's successful, maybe we'll get it. But why would Google want to do this? According to Google's head of new business development, the company would be able to deliver "more focused and targeted advertising". However, he added that building its own wireless network was in line with Google's thinking on "delivering answers, anytime, anywhere, to anyone, and not necessarily on a desktop PC".

RADIO ACTIVITY

Although these rather megalomaniacal plans for world domination may not materialise in the next 12 months, 2006 will finally see the emergence of much faster WiFi access, if Intel and the Enhanced

Wireless Consortium (EWC) get their way. WiFi at 600Mbit/s (four times faster than today's fastest service) will appear later in 2006, making it possible to stream HDTV signals around the home in real time. Perhaps that will finally make 2006 the year of the digital hub in the living room. Apple and Microsoft are both plugging away at this, but so far the public has not shown much interest.

On the other hand, the protracted battle between the Blu-ray and HD-DVD camps over who will produce the next generation of DVD discs means that 2006 will not be the year customers throw away their DVD players. It's now emerging that the scrap between the two different standards is less about which is technically superior or cheaper for the customer but rather which one offers the most restrictive digital rights management. The fact that five out of six Hollywood studios are backing Blu-ray should be a recommendation for HD-DVD.

It took Bill Gates to lead the criticism of Blu-ray for having a "protection scheme" that is "very anti-consumer", meaning that it "won't work well on PCs and you won't be able to play movies and do software in a flexible way". If even Gates is worried about it being inflexible and unfriendly to consumers, it must be bad!

But Gates doesn't seem to think it will matter much anyway because soon "everything's going to be streamed or on hard disk". The fact that it could be Apple that's streaming the video from its iTunes Music Store is probably more of a worry for him. ☹